

'A' From **Avocados** *To 'Z'* **Zucchini**

Ag students learn by growing

By Darlene Slack • Photos by Jeff Greene



The words “hands on” and “learn by doing” have been synonymous with Cal Poly’s agriculture programs for more than 100 years. From cultivating row crops to raising animals, Cal Poly believes the best way for students to learn something is to *do* it.

The Cal Poly Foundation helps make this a reality by providing operating capital and accounting services for more than 60 agricultural enterprise projects annually. Typically, about 350 students a year participate.

These projects offer many advantages to students: experience in managing a small agribusiness, working with others and working under supervision; an opportunity to learn and practice specialized skills unique to the project; practical experience complementary to laboratory and lecture instruction; and sharing in any profits.

“The experience gained by students running these projects is highly valued by employers who frequently cite enterprise projects, along with senior projects, as essential in shaping the Cal Poly graduate,” says Mark Shelton, associate dean of the College of Agriculture.

See Enterprise, page 12

In the Cal Poly Poultry Unit, animal science major Jake Olson candles eggs to check for imperfections before packing.

Enterprise projects cover the spectrum of Cal Poly agriculture programs. Students manufacture dairy products; produce and process beef, swine, sheep, and poultry products; produce small grain, vegetable, and fruit crops, ornamental plants, flowers, and Christmas trees; and process food products.

Students are not the only ones who benefit from the agricultural enterprise projects. The produce, dairy products, and flowers that exceed the need of the campus community are often sold through local farmers' markets and supermarkets. Livestock is trained and tested for area ranchers, and horses are raised, trained, and then sold at places such as Hollywood Park.

The freshest of eggs

Cal Poly's egg production program is big business – really big business – 14,000 chickens and 280,000 *dozen* eggs a year.

In many ways, producing Cal Poly eggs is a typical ag enterprise project, but its size and sales of about \$850,000 and what much of the money is used for sets it apart. "The poultry program is self-funded," explains Animal Science Professor Bob Spiller. "The profits from our egg sales buy supplies and equipment and pay for student workers, among other things."

Typically, four students at a time participate in this enterprise project. There are two egg production buildings housing the 14,000 birds. Students look after the birds' health, monitor water levels and the electrical and mechanical

systems, and wash, grade, and distribute the eggs. Each student works about two days a week in this seven-day-a-week enterprise.

"Students want to participate because they gain valuable education and job experience," Spiller says. "They are motivated to help the hens produce as many eggs as possible because the more we sell, the more money we can make."

The optimum production life span for the chickens is two years. Each summer half of the flock is replaced.

Spiller, who has been at Cal Poly since 1989, has seen community interest in Cal Poly eggs increase over the years. "Cal Poly has quite a following in local stores. We sell to eight Albertson's stores and markets in Morro Bay and Cambria." Even when Albertson's runs specials on other



Right: Fruit science major Shannon Gledhill and plant protection science major Chris Mann sell sweet Cal Poly corn at the San Luis Obispo Farmers' Market.



Ag science major Karla Canant (left) and ag education graduate Becky Judge work in Cal Poly's perennial production area. Enterprise project funds from the sale of these plants support students in Associated Landscape Contractors of America national competitions, where Cal Poly teams have won first place in 11 out of the last 14 events.

brands of eggs, Spiller says the store "still sells a good amount of Cal Poly eggs."

The sweetest of corn

Cal Poly-grown corn is highly sought after by San Luis Obispo locals. Each year, between two and five acres are planted with different varieties and tended by agricultural enterprise students.

Chris Mann, a plant protection science senior, chose the sweet corn project this year to learn more about field crops. His background is in fruit tree production and he has participated previously in citrus and avocado projects.

"Since the spring, I've been involved in preparing and fertilizing the soil, irrigating, controlling pests, and harvesting and selling corn," Mann says. "That's much more than I could ever learn just in a classroom."

Weeds and insects are the bane of any farm, especially at Cal Poly, which doesn't use Class 1 restricted chemicals. "Controlling weeds and insects is a real challenge," Mann says. "Not using those chemicals requires a lot more physical labor to keep the weeds out."

Corn earworms are one of the biggest problems the students face. This year, according to Horticulture and Crop Science Professor Gene Offermann, the project's advisor, they will try a biological control experiment by releasing predator wasps into the fields to eat the corn earworms. "We're hoping for 75 percent control," Mann says.

The more enjoyable aspect of the project is selling the corn, especially at the Farmers' Market in downtown San Luis Obispo, where Mann and the other students can see and hear the

customers' enthusiastic appreciation for their hard work. The sweet corn is also sold at two local supermarkets.

Mann said he has come away with a good understanding of the actual labor that is necessary in agriculture. "I think it's important to acknowledge that, especially if you're a farm manager."

The difference

Cal Poly products, produced and sold by agriculture students with the help of the Cal Poly Foundation, are popular because attention is paid to quality, good service, and fair prices. And products are often fresher because the operations are smaller than commercial ones.

Education and experience are what Cal Poly's ag enterprise program is all about, and if others get to enjoy the fruits of those projects, all the better.